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### Javier Marías

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## Javier Marías

Javier Marías is a major European writer and the author of eleven novels (including *Tu rostro mañana* [*Your Face Tomorrow*], published in three volumes between 2002 and 2007), which have been translated into forty-one languages and published in fifty-one countries, two collections of short stories, and nineteen collections of essays, articles, newspaper columns and biographical portraits.

Born in Madrid in 1951, he is the fourth of five sons of Dolores Franco and Julián Marías. (The firstborn, Julianín, died at the age of three and a half in 1949 and is movingly evoked by Javier Marías in *Negra espalda del tiempo* (1998) [*Dark Back of Time*], as well as by the father in his memoirs). His mother and father, who met at university in the turbulent Spain of the 1930s during the Second Republic, were both avid readers and writers. His mother gave up her scholarly writing to bring up her sons. His father was a philosopher, teacher, intellectual, and a figure found rarely in Spain. A disciple and friend of the philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, Julián Marías was a truly upright and principled person, gentle in private, religious but at the same time politically progressive. He had the misfortune of looking for the political middle in a period of extremes and blind party loyalty, was incapable of seeking exile due to his profound dedication to his country, but also incapable of complicity with the situation dominant under General Francisco Franco's dictatorship. Partly due to the fact that he had forged affiliations with the Second Spanish Republic during the Spanish Civil War, he was denounced on mostly false charges at the outset of the Franco regime by a treacherous friend and subsequently imprisoned. He suffered further reprisals thereafter, such as not being permitted to teach at Spanish universities under Franco. As a result, he travelled regularly to the United States to undertake teaching at various universities there, on occasion accompanied by his family. Thus, Javier Marías spent the first year of his life in Massachusetts, where his father was teaching at Wellesley College, and another half a year at the age of four in New Haven when his father worked at Yale. During Spain's transition from dictatorship to democratic government in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as Senator by Royal Decree and in discussions with King Juan Carlos I and President Adolfo Suárez in particular, Julián Marías contributed to the careful reform and democratization of Spanish society, as well as to the drafting of the Constitution of 1978. His sons, Miguel, Fernando, Javier, and Álvaro, grew up in a house brimming with books, paintings, and music, as well as with (mostly female) North American exchange

students (his father also taught for US institutions in Spain), and writers and intellectuals with whom the Marías's were acquainted or friends. They received an open-minded, progressive and international education both at home and at the uniquely secular, liberal, and coeducational Colegio Estudio, in stark contrast with the dominant nationalist and catholic tendencies of the dictatorial regime. Their upbringing was therefore in many ways quite exceptional and privileged, but this privilege had been gained by Dolores Franco and, especially, Julián Marías through their fierce independence of mind and character, and the latter, in particular, paid a price for it throughout his entire life. All four sons have become well known in Spain as film critics, art historians, musicians and music critics and, in the case of Javier, authors.

In 1965, at the age of fourteen, Javier Marías wrote his first published short story, “La vida y muerte de Marcelino Iturriaga” [“Life and Death of Marcelino Iturriaga”] and a year later his first novel, *La víspera* [*The Day Before*], which remains unpublished, however. In 1974 he obtained a degree in English Literature from the Complutense University in Madrid, at which he had enrolled in 1968. While he was studying, he began translating and co-authoring film scripts for both his uncle and his cousin, the filmmakers Jesús (“Jess”) and Ricardo Franco, as well as working as a production assistant and appearing as an extra in some of their films. His first published novel, also written during that period, *Los dominios del lobo* (1971) [*The Domains of the Wolf*], bears witness to this fascination with cinema. Both his first and his second novel, *Travesía del horizonte* (1972) [*Voyage Along the Horizon*], are narratives exclusively set abroad, that is, outside of Spain, and populated solely by non-Spanish characters (North American in the case of the former, European — particularly British and French — in the latter). And both early novels are consciously imitative of foreign cinema (Hollywood comedies, melodramas, gangster and *films noirs* of the 1930s, 40s and 50s in particular) and Edwardian literature (especially James, Conrad and Conan Doyle), respectively. Like many Spanish writers of his generation, the so-called *novísimos*, Marías opted for imitative writing as a first step in his artistic development, whilst rejecting the realist mode that had characterized much Spanish literature up to that point and attempting to break with Spanish literary tradition more generally and renouncing Spain as a theme and the presence of any form of Spanishness in literature.

Nevertheless, Marías quickly became aware that he could not continue along this path, as he elaborated in the essay “Desde una novela no necesariamente castiza” [“From a Novel not ‘Typically Spanish’”]

<BLOCKQUOTE> But it was evident that this “extreme foreign-tending” attitude could not last forever. I wanted it to be possible — and not an extravagance — to write a not necessarily traditionally Spanish novel in Spain, but, equally, I was not particularly set on cultivating an obligatorily extraterritorial novel. Following the publication of my second book, of a more complex style and structure than the first, it became clear to me that if I continued solely and exclusively in this parodic vein, I ran the risk of becoming a sort of false cosmopolitan *à la* Paul Morand [...] However, I had distanced myself to such an extent from my own flesh, as that distinguished critic had called my reality, that I could not bridge the gap quickly and in one leap. Moreover, I have to admit [...] that at the age of twenty-three and still in the process of development as a writer I felt no particular urgency to say or narrate anything in particular.

</BLOCKQUOTE> (Marías 1993: 54-55)

As a result, and in a conscious decision to further his literary apprenticeship, Marías took to translating Anglo-American literature into Spanish, in particular works by John Ashbery, W. H. Auden, Sir Thomas Browne, Joseph Conrad, Isak Dinesen, William Faulkner, Thomas Hardy, Edith Holden, Vladimir Nabokov, Frank O’Hara, J. D. Salinger, Wallace Stevens, Robert Louis Stevenson and William Butler Yeats. His most notable translation was undoubtedly that of Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, which not only earned him Spain’s National Translation Prize in 1979 but had a profound bearing on Marías’s own digressive prose style.

In 1974 he moved to Barcelona and became a member the editorial board of the Alfaguara publishing house presided over by Jaime Salinas (he would travel regularly to Madrid for the meetings). From 1977 onwards he also began to write frequently for newspapers. That same year he returned to Madrid and moved in with his father following the death of his mother on 24 December 1977. A year later he published his third novel, if it can be called that, *El monarca del tiempo* (1978) [*The Monarch of Time*], a somewhat idiosyncratic work consisting of five rather loosely interrelated parts, three of which are short stories, one an essay and the final one a short play dissolving into a prose narrative, in the tradition of Valle-Inclán, by way of lengthy and subjective stage directions. That was followed by *El siglo* (1983) [*The Century*], for which Marías draws inspiration from the story of his father’s betrayal at the end of the Civil War by his best

friend (the protagonist of the novel is an informer) — a story which had profoundly impressed him as a child and to which he would return and expand on in *Your Face Tomorrow* — and *El hombre sentimental* (1986) [*The Man of Feeling*].

In 1983 Marías was appointed to a three-year post as *lector*/lecturer at the University of Oxford, where he taught in the Sub-Faculty of Spanish. He took unpaid leave in the Autumn of 1984 to work at Wellesley College, where he had spent the first year of his life, teaching a semester-long course on Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quijote de la Mancha*. He then returned to Oxford for the remainder of the academic year of 1984-1985, before resigning from the post on 30 September 1985. From 1986 till 1990 he taught translation theory at the Complutense University, before losing any remaining interest in the academy. By that stage he had begun to make a living as a writer, even though, as he has always insisted, he has never seen himself as a professional writer. *Corazón tan blanco* (1992) [*A Heart So White*] and *Mañana en la batalla piensa en mí* (1994) [*Tomorrow in the Battle Think on Me*], in particular, were published to great acclaim both in Spain and especially abroad, where both became bestsellers, first in France and then in Germany. Here Marías was lauded by the critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki in an influential book programme on television (*Literarisches Quartett*) and quickly became a household name.

Marías's sojourn in Oxford was to prove particularly significant. The year 1989 saw the publication of his novel *Todas las almas* [*All Souls*], set in Oxford and drawing on his experiences there. However, it is not an autobiographical work, nor is it a *roman à clef*, even if the author seems to invite identification, at least in part, with his narrator-protagonist and there appear to be some correspondences between certain characters in the novel and persons who exist or existed in empirical reality, especially some members of the Sub-Faculty of Spanish of the University. The inclusion of John Gawsworth as a secondary character in that novel, the only real-life character, a poet and bibliophile and the second King of Redonda, whom many paradoxically took to be a fictional entity, led to Marías eventually being crowned King Xavier I of Redonda; that is to say, Marías became successor to one of his literary characters, after Gawsworth's annointed heir and executor of his and the first king's — M. P. Shiel's — literary estate abdicated in Marías's favour, having learnt of the latter's interest in Gawsworth in *All Souls*. The unusual inclusion of photographs in that novel (of Gawsworth and his death mask), something which subsequently became the hallmark of W. G. Sebald's prose narratives and then somewhat of a literary trend in recent years, continued in *Negra espalda del tiempo*

(1998) [*Dark Back of Time*], an intriguing, digressive, plotless, biographical, autobiographical and fictional prose narrative-cum-essay (or “false novel” as Marías himself called it), in which there are over thirty photographic reproductions or illustrations, as well as in the first and third volumes of *Your Face Tomorrow*. *Todas las almas* established Marías as one of Spain’s most noteworthy living writers, and his reputation has only grown since. In Spain, his standing as a freethinking and fiercely independent and outspoken intellectual and observer of Spain and Spanish society has been forged by his contributions to the press and a weekly newspaper column he has written since 1994.

It is also from his Oxford period onwards that Marías’s interest in narrating and fictionalizing his own and other people’s lives, especially those of foreign writers, gradually increased, as well as, concomitantly, in obscuring the lines separating empirical reality from fiction, by subjecting material to a process of indetermination that makes it impossible to tell the difference between one and the other sphere. This interest is reflected in the biographical and autobiographical elements in his fiction and in his essays, articles and columns, which have been collected in a series of volumes, some of whose titles are suggestive of the process of indetermination to which literature subjects empirical reality, such as *Vidas escritas* (1992) [*Written Lives*], *Literatura y fantasma* (1993) [*Literature and Ghost*], *Vida del fantasma* (1995) [*A Life of the Ghost*] or *Mano de sombra* (1997) [*Hand of Shade*].

Marías was the first Spanish writer to be bestowed the prestigious Latin American Rómulo Gallegos prize, and has been conferred innumerable Spanish and international prizes for his work, amongst others, the Spanish Premio de la Crítica, the Premio Fastenrath of the Spanish Royal Academy, the German Nelly Sachs Prize, the French Prix Femina du Roman Etranger and the Prix l’Oeil et la Lettre, the IMPAC International Dublin Literary Award, the Italian prizes Ennio Flaiano, Grinzane Cavour and Alberto Moravia, and, most recently, the Austrian National Prize for European Literature. His work has been praised by critics worldwide and, more notably, by many of his peers, such as Antony Beevor, Roberto Bolaño, J. M. Coetzee, Claudio Magris, Eduardo Mendoza, Orhan Pamuk and Ali Smith. He is only one of four Spanish twentieth- and twenty-first-century authors (alongside Miguel de Unamuno, Federico García Lorca and Camilo José Cela) to have been granted an entry in *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*. He is a Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres and a member of the Spanish Royal Academy. And after becoming king of the literary

kingdom of Redonda, Marías not only founded his own publishing house, giving it the kingdom's name, *Reino de Redonda*, but perpetuated the tradition of creating a literary nobility. This includes peers such as Francis Ford Coppola, William Boyd, W. G. Sebald, Frank Gehry, Umberto Eco, Milan Kundera or George Steiner, and offices such as a Keeper of the Royal Flame & Arrow, a Surreptitious Envoy to the United Nations, a Fencing Master Royal, a Rain-Measurer & Inspector of Poisons Royal or a Physician to the Royal Psyche.

His latest novel, *Los enamoramientos* (2011) has appeared in Spain to rare unanimous critical acclaim and quickly became a best seller during Madrid's annual book fair. It will appear in the UK with Hamish Hamilton as *The Infatuations* in 2013 and Penguin Classics have also recently acquired a backlist of most of his major works for their *Penguin Modern Classics* series, providing yet further confirmation of what many have known for quite some time now, namely that Javier Marías is just that — a modern classic.

*Alexis Grobmann*

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